

Editorial

The ethnographer in the text: Stories of disconcertment in the changing worlds of north Australian social research

Michael Christie and Helen Verran

This collection of papers grew from a workshop held at the Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University, early in 2012. We set ourselves the task of writing short ethnographic texts that attend to some of the often subtle disconcertments which arise when we as social scientists in the Northern Territory go about our everyday work with Aboriginal individuals and groups. We began our workshop by talking about the researcher in the text, contrasting that figure with the researcher in the flesh. Of particular interest were the conventional writing position of the removed judging observer analyst, and the pervasive practices of distancing, temporally and physically which so often seem to infect and alienate the writer and the writing of social sciences. From an analytic perspective how can we usefully think about the relation between the textual and fleshy figures? The scholarly articles we set as readings for the workshop—Kathryn Pyne Addelson, *The Emergence of the Fetus* (2002), and Brit Ross Winthereik and Helen Verran, *Ethnographic Stories as Generalizations that Intervene* (2012)—directed our focus to ontological issues, bringing in the notion of public problems and the question of how ethnographic stories are generalisations.

As participants in the workshop we agreed to craft and to share short ethnographic stories of our own work as social scientists and to pay particular attention to how we as active participants in the problem of the moment were constituted through its unfolding action in new and unexpected ways. The specific injunction under which these short texts were written was ‘Start in the middle, find and name your disconcertment precisely, articulate tensions, be clear about the change your experience has wrought in you, and stop.’ Not all of us managed to follow those instructions.

Writing from within the rapidly changing worlds of governments, universities and Aboriginal communities in Northern Australia, the texts that follow examine the ontological tensions which arise from, excite or frustrate the assumptions and practices we bring to our work as activist researchers in the application of social science. Why did we choose to work with ethnographic narrative? While all the workshop participants understand themselves as social scientists, most of us do not routinely undertake ethnography. In this exercise we sought to use stories of our work to focus on how new ideas and ways emerge from collective action and how they depend upon

the coming together of diverse subjects and settings. We focus upon how new energetics unsettle, contradict or transform our sometimes thoughtless assumptions. Stories have a special ability to clarify the character of their participants (ourselves, we hope, especially), their histories, desires, imagination, their psychological and emotional states, their aesthetics and their entrenchedness and as well as their searching for the new and the different. They introduce and engage unusual and nonhuman participants. Through writing of our participation in the public problems of the moment as social scientists, and paying particular attention to the ways in which we ourselves are affected and changed as university researchers and students, we hope to open possibilities for new ways of understanding the changing work of academic social science.

References

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Ross Winthereick, B. and Verran, H. (2012). Ethnographic stories as generalizations that intervene. *Science Studies* 25(1) 37-51.